

Horrific mass killing on Canadian First Nation reserve leaves 11 people dead

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7 September 2022

Ten people lost their lives Sunday in a stabbing rampage on the James Smith Cree Nation and in the nearby village of Weldon in northeast Saskatchewan, some 170 kilometres northeast of Saskatoon. Damien Sanderson, one of two brothers suspected of committing the horrific murders, was found dead early Monday with wounds that police say were not self-inflicted, bringing the death toll to 11.

After a days-long manhunt, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) announced Wednesday evening that 32-year-old Myles Sanders, the main suspect in the attack, had died after his arrest earlier in the day in Rosthern, which lies some 130 kilometers southwest of James Smith Cree Nation. An RCMP spokeswoman said Sanders had gone into “medical distress” while in police custody, but refused to say more about his manner of death. Another source told the Associated Press that Sanders died of “self-inflicted injuries.” RCMP assistant commissioner Rhonda Blackmore stated she could not confirm how he died until an autopsy is completed.

Myles Sanderson and his brother attacked dozens of people Sunday. Some were expressly targeted, while others were selected at random. The deceased came from a cross-section of society, with the youngest a 23-year-old man, Thomas Burns, and the eldest a 77-year-old retired resident of Weldon, Wesley Petterson. They included a 49-year-old mother of five, Lana Head, and a 61-year-old first responder, Lydia Gloria Burns, who was tending to the injured when she was killed.

At least 18 people, including several children, were injured in the rampage. As of Tuesday afternoon, 10 remained in hospital, three of them in critical condition.

James Smith Cree First Nation is a community of approximately 1,900 residents on the North Saskatchewan River, although some 3,400 people are members of the First Nation when those who live off-reserve are included.

Myles Sanderson’s childhood biography provides insight into the terrible socio-economic and cultural conditions under which the vast majority of Canada’s indigenous population suffers. After his parents separated when he was nine due to a violent relationship, Myles moved repeatedly between his father’s home in an urban centre and his paternal grandparents’ residence on-reserve. Both locations were dominated by violence, and drug and alcohol abuse. According to a Parole

Board of Canada document from last February, Myles began using alcohol and marijuana at the age of 12 to cope with mental health problems and was using cocaine by the time he was 14. He later reportedly fell in with one or more criminal gangs.

Since turning 18, he has been convicted of 59 criminal offences, including assault, assault with a weapon, damage to property, robbery, and dozens of supervised release violations.

Indigenous people on-reserve live in conditions of deprivation that more resemble an impoverished third world country than the rest of Canada. A Statistics Canada study based on 2016 census data found that 44 percent of on-reserve residents live in low-income households compared to 14 percent for the total population. Life expectancy for First Nations men is more than eight years lower than their non-First Nations counterparts, and over nine years lower for First Nations women. Although indigenous people make up just 4 percent of Canada’s population, they account for 37 percent of its prison inmates.

The social misery and brutality that lie behind these statistics are products of over a century and a half of savage mistreatment by the Canadian capitalist state, beginning with the forcible dispossession of the native people and the destruction of their communal forms of property. There followed a systematic effort on the part of the ruling class to transform them into a docile workforce, including through the suppression of native culture. This was exemplified by the state-created, church-run residential school system. Generations of native children were forced to attend schools, often hundreds of miles from their families, where they were forbidden to speak their native languages, forced to work for their upkeep, and subject to physical and frequently sexual abuse.

In April 2020, the Archbishop of Canterbury travelled to James Smith Cree Nation. After a day of listening to stories of the abuse and trauma experienced by residential school survivors, he delivered a pre-planned “apology” on behalf of the Anglican Church.

Robbed of their land, languages, families, and culture, native people were plunged by Canadian capitalism into generations of poverty and deprivation, further compounded by frequent encroachments on and the outright seizure of First Nation

reserve land for resource projects or military purposes.

While many indigenous people moved to urban centres like Toronto, Winnipeg, Regina and Vancouver, where they not infrequently wound up living in slums if not on the streets, a significant portion remained on isolated reserves, denied social support and lacking many of the basic necessities of modern life. The Trudeau Liberal government came to power in 2015 pledging to supply all reserves with clean drinking water—many have been under boil-water advisories for decades—and other essentials. Seven years later and after countless pompous and insincere Liberal pledges of social justice for the native people, these promises remain unfulfilled.

Responding to Sunday's tragedy in his usual sanctimonious style, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau declared in a national address, "This kind of violence, or any kind of violence, has no place in our country."

Who does he think he is kidding? Canadian capitalist society is awash with violence and brutality, of which the persecution of the Indigenous population is just one of the most extreme examples. A young adult in their early 30s, the same age as the Sanderson brothers, has never experienced a day of their conscious adult life in which Canada or its principal ally, the United States, was not at war. Beginning with the NATO bombardment of Serbia in 1999 and Canada's participation in the brutal neocolonial occupation of Afghanistan in 2001, successive Canadian governments have claimed the right to enforce imperialist interests through the use of the most savage violence in places as far-flung as Haiti, Libya, Syria, and Ukraine. This has included support for the use of torture and other systematic violations of international law.

Two decades of war and ever mounting social inequality have left their indelible mark on Canadian society, as shown by the increased frequency of violent outbursts resulting in mass casualties. According to Wikipedia, six mass killings have occurred in Canada since 2014, compared to just one in the 2000s and two in the 1990s. Sunday's mass killing was the greatest single loss of life since the April 2020 mass shooting in Nova Scotia, which claimed the lives of 22 people. In June 2021, four members of a Muslim family from London, Ontario, were fatally wounded after being struck by a truck in a deliberate attack planned by a far-right fanatic.

These figures only account for the deadliest examples of armed violence, which is becoming a common feature of daily life. In June, twin brothers, apparently motivated by far-right political sympathies, were killed after engaging police in a shootout outside a Bank of Montreal branch they had tried to rob in Saanich, British Columbia. Less than a month later, a gunman in Langley, BC, shot and killed two homeless people and injured two more in a rampage lasting several hours.

A significant proportion of the increasing number of acts of mass violence that have roiled Canada in recent years have been perpetrated by individuals influenced by an increasingly self-confident far-right political movement with close

connections to fascist forces in the United States. From the July 2020 effort by right-wing extremist reservist Corey Hurren to assassinate Trudeau, to the open calls for political violence and the erection of a dictatorship made by the far-right leaders of February's "Freedom Convoy," fascistic political forces systematically built up by a section of the ruling elite have worked to legitimize the use of violence and contempt for democratic rights.

The increasing resort to violence in response to social and political problems has been accompanied by a cheapening of human life. This finds its clearest expression in the ruthless "profits before life" pandemic policy adopted by all levels of government, which placed the protection of investor wealth above the safeguarding of the health and very lives of the population from COVID-19. The result has been millions of unnecessary infections, an unknown number of debilitating cases of Long COVID, and tens of thousands of preventable deaths.

As with many social indices, the disastrous impact of the pandemic has been particularly evident on the overwhelmingly impoverished Indigenous population. Manitoba reported a year after the pandemic began that as of early 2021, the province's Indigenous population accounted for 70 percent of infections despite making up just 10 percent of the population. As of October 2021, the death rate among Indigenous communities in northern Saskatchewan, where James Smith Cree Nation is located, was 2.6 times higher than the death rate for the province as a whole.

The mass killing on James Smith Cree Nation is above all an indictment of the capitalist profit system, which must be overthrown to put an end to the economic misery and social deprivation faced by Canada's Indigenous population. As the working class enters into mass struggles for the first time in decades against the rising cost of living, attacks on wages and conditions, and the ruling elite's pandemic policy, it must take up the fight for the liberation of the Indigenous population from capitalist oppression as part of the fight for socialism.



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